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LITERARY EXPRESSION IN THE THIRD GRADE

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Teacher and pupils, in the course of studying a subject, frequently reach a point where the essential and the only adequate means of expression is through words, in some form. The pupils are interested, primarily, in getting the idea expressed, but this process of expression, once started, is found to be, not alone the expression of a thought, but the analysis and organization of it, as well. How is the idea to be appropriately stated? Is it essentially forthright and peripatetic, so that it may be expressed best, in *narrative* form? Is it dramatic, so that it should be thrown into a *play*? Or does it appeal to the emotions in such a way that the *lyric*, only, sets it forth adequately?

That is to say, we are confronted by the practical problems connected with the artistic purpose and the means which should be used to carry out that purpose. This relation is at once as ancient as the sagas and as modern as the high-school pupil's theme. It is, moreover, real. Far from being mere fanciful dresses in which to trick out writings, the historic literary forms, *narration*, *drama*, *lyric*, *exposition*, and the like, are an outcome of these varied relations of the teller or writer to his material.

Now these relations exist for the young child endeavoring to express himself, quite as truly as for the older pupil wrestling with his "theme." Indeed, it is possible that there would be no wrestling with a "theme," in later years, if there were a perfect understanding of these relations, in what corresponds with the "theme" in the earlier years of school life.

We remember when the "pathetic fallacy" swept over the elementary grades, and plant, post-box, or pony were alike forced to yield, in terms curiously similar, the story of their lives; it was the day when "dear Mother Nature" babbled inane, pointless tales, often untrue! That we have made a great ad-

vance in setting forth the thought in form appropriate to the substance, is seen where the bulb yields a record of growth, beautiful in its simple scientific exactness; the post-box calls forth an exposition; the pony suggests a narrative, and even Mother Nature herself may be relied upon for a spring lyric!

The following illustrations are limited to expression in English arising from *The Odyssey*, in history, studied during the latter part of the autumn quarter, in the third grade.

The teacher told the story, read aloud from Palmer's translation of *The Odyssey*, or the pupils read from easier sources. Certain of the adventures of Odysseus took strong hold on the interest and the imagination of the children; they were all eager to tell them to a group of younger children. But only one may tell a story, although many may suggest what shall be told, and how. So the tales were mulled over, "my" thought becoming "our" thought as the material, organized under healthy stimulating social conditions, one suggesting, another adding or altering, took various forms. The incident entitled "The Joke" naturally fell into narrative form. In the oral composition of it, the point persisting in appearing before due preparation had been made, the children were impressed with this principle in narrative: "success in it consists in having a point, and in not passing it or omitting any essential thing by the way."

Nor was this all. The distinction between direct and indirect quotations, the greater effectiveness of the former, training in sentence recognition, the omission of the connective "and," capitalization, punctuation, and the like were all a necessary part of the work. Small as the unit is, and simple, yet the qualities of the modern short story are there—vividness, compression, unity.

THE JOKE

"What is your name?" asked Polyphemus.

"My name is 'Nobody,'" answered Odysseus.

The giant, Polyphemus, killed Odysseus' men, so Odysseus blinded the wicked giant in his cave. He howled with pain. The giants outside asked who was hurting him.

"Nobody is hurting me!" cried Polyphemus.

The other giants answered, "If nobody is hurting you, then you surely are not hurt." Then they all went away and left Polyphemus.

The children found that they needed definite directions for playing the Greek games. After consulting their Greek stories, and photographs of Greek statues, they composed orally the following exposition of discus throwing. Then they wrote the directions and followed them. The problem was to state only the points actually needed to throw the discus successfully, and to state them as needed—just the problem of any exposition, whether in the third year of the elementary or in the third year of the high school, and involving exactly the same principles.

“The discus is held in the right hand. ‘It’ is thrown backward,” as first suggested, was shown to leave uncertainty as to whether the hand or the discus was thrown backward. The relative “which” was selected after a brief search as the best word to use—a natural advance from the simple to the complex form of sentence.

THROWING THE DISCUS

In throwing the discus the upper part of the body is bent downward, toward the right. The right leg is bent. Upon it the left hand rests, for balance. The weight of the body is thrown on the right foot. The left foot barely touches the ground. The discus is held in the right hand, which is thrown backward. The head is turned toward the discus. Then the discus is thrown with great force.

“The Palace of Odysseus” is the beginning of a number of short descriptive pieces written for a higher grade which was also interested in the Greeks.

THE PALACE OF ODYSSEUS

A stone wall surrounds the palace. It protects the people. The main hall of the palace is very large. In the center is a fireplace, and around it are oaken couches. The women’s rooms are back of this hall, etc.

The siren incident cried aloud to be played, so the dramatic form was chosen. As the play was fashioned, the teacher wrote it on the blackboard so that all might see it and add or change at will. When the siren’s song was needed, a lyric was composed, of which one pupil suggested the rhythm, another a line, another an improvement, and so on. The teacher’s aid took the form of reading aloud several lyrics, such as “Sweet and Low,” and “Ye Mariners of England,” while the pupils marked the rhythm

in various ways. The style of the play, throughout, caught as it was from the great *Odyssey* itself, is direct, and even rapid, simple, yet high in thought and expression. The formal training side of the work can readily be seen, as in the punctuation of possessive plural, contraction, and the like. The great opportunities for development of the imagination, the judgment, the grasping of the situation and the choice of appropriate expression for it, must also be apparent.

ODYSSEUS AND THE SIRENS

(A Play Made by the Third Grade)

CHARACTERS: *Odysseus* and his companions, *The Sirens*.

SCENE: On the sea in a Greek boat.

Odysseus: Ho, my men! Now that the wind is fair, let us be off.

(ACTION: *Men loosen the cables, rush to their oars, and the wind fills the sails. The men row.*)

Odysseus: Listen, comrades. I have sad news to tell you. Circe told me that we should come to the island of the Sirens. She warned me to fill your ears with soft wax to escape the voices of the Sirens. She bade me, only, to hear their voices. Bind me upright to the mast. If I motion to you to free me, you must only tie more ropes around me.

(ACTION: *Men furl the sail. They whiten the waves with their oars. Odysseus cuts a cake of wax with his sword. Then he kneads it in his hands.*)

A Sailor: How shall we tie you, great leader?

Odysseus: So, comrade, with many strong cords.

(ACTION: *Odysseus stops the sailors' ears with wax. The sailors bind Odysseus hand and foot to the mast. The boat glides toward the Sirens' islands.*)

Sirens (sing "Sirens' Song"):

Bring your ship ashore, *Odysseus*, listen to our song!

No one's ever passed us in a black hulled ship,

'Til from our lips they've heard our song, then gone upon their way,

For we know all that's happened on the boundless earth!

CHORUS

O come, *Odysseus* come!

Listen to our song!

(ACTION: *Odysseus motions to his men to set him free. Two men tie more ropes around him.*)

First Sailor: No! No! We will not set you free. You commanded us not to.

Second Sailor: Great Odysseus, remember your wife and son.

(ACTION: *The Boat passes the Sirens' island. The song becomes clearer and sweeter.*)

Sirens (Repeat their song.)

Odysseus (wildly): Untie me! Let me free!

(ACTION: *Men row their hardest. The boat glides swiftly past the island. The song becomes fainter, until it cannot be heard.*)

Odysseus (motioning): Take the wax from your ears. The danger is past.

(ACTION: *Sailors unbind Odysseus.*)

All: Sing "Odysseus' Boat Song"

I

Pull deep on your oars for the wind is high,
The waves are strong and sea-gulls fly,
The white-caps rise on the deep blue sea,
While Penelope's waiting at home for me.

II

We pass the rocks on the islands drear,
While fearful foes are hiding near,
But swiftly over the waves go we,
For Penelope's waiting at home for me.